
Responding to the Closing of Democratic Space

SHANNON N. GREEN

AFTER NEARLY FOUR DECADES OF UNRIVALED EXPANSION, DEMOCRACIES WORLDWIDE APPEAR TO BE BACK ON THEIR HEELS. Authoritarian regimes, semi-authoritarian regimes, and new and fragile democracies are increasingly constricting civil and political rights, intensifying pressure on civil society and human-rights defenders, cracking down on independent media, appropriating the Internet and social media to propagate alternative truths and monitor critics, and broadening the powers and reach of internal security services, often under the guise of countering terrorism. According to Freedom House, in 2014, for the ninth year in a row, nearly twice as many countries experienced declines to civil liberties and political rights as registered gains.¹

Perhaps more ominously, the repressive tactics and ambitions of many states extend beyond the domestic sphere. Authoritarian governments are increasingly sharing “worst practices.” For example, prohibitions on foreign funding for certain political or human rights activities that originated in Russia quickly spread to Ethiopia, India, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.² And other countries, such as Ecuador, Hungary, Iran, Rwanda, Turkey, and Uganda, appear to be looking to China for inspiration and reassurance that it is possible to usher in an era of increased economic prosperity and modernity, while maintaining political power and controls.

¹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2015* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2015), 1–29, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015>.

² Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, “Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support under Fire,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2014, 1–90.

Finally, authoritarian governments are using their participation in multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, to erode international norms and standards on democracy and human rights and shield themselves from criticism for their antidemocratic behaviors. As a result, democracy—and the system of democratic values and norms that has been built up over the past few decades—is increasingly under assault around the world.

The question facing us now is what kind of century we have lying ahead: one characterized by a brief period of democratic stagnation or backsliding or one in which we will see a prolonged democratic recession? Part of the answer lies in how democracies themselves respond. As authoritarian models gain traction globally, the United States and its democratic allies must mount a concerted effort to reassert democratic values and reestablish democracy's prestige. This starts with making democracy deliver.

Democracy's appeal has been weakened by chronic political and economic crises in longstanding democracies, and the seeming inability of those in power to decisively confront these challenges. The global financial crisis that began in 2007—and still reverberates in sluggish wage growth in the United States, high unemployment rates in much of Europe, and the near-collapse of the Eurozone over Greece's debt—undermined the belief that democracies are uniquely positioned to deliver prosperity. Likewise, the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, and the at-times chaotic and brutal response to it, have called into question the ability of advanced democracies to collectively respond to complex emergencies and abide by their international commitments.



Finally, the annual threat of a government shutdown in the United States and the perpetual inability of the Congress to pass a budget have created doubts about whether democracies are capable of performing even the most basic governance functions. The Obama administration recognized the impact of gridlock on America's standing, concluding in the 2015 National Security Strategy that political dysfunction "undermines national unity, stifles bipartisan cooperation, and ultimately erodes the perception and strength of our leadership abroad."³

Despite these warning signs, democracy retains significant strengths and is still the preferred system of government in most countries, according to regular global surveys. And autocracies are not immune from political dysfunction or economic misfortunes, as the recent slowdown in China demonstrates. Reclaiming democracy's momentum will require the United States and other established democracies to get their own houses in order and recommit to partnership and joint action.

The Community of Democracies (CD) was established in 2000 for just this purpose—as a unique platform for democratic countries to come togeth-

³ Barack H. Obama, National Security Strategy (Washington, DC: The White House), February 2015, 1–29, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf.

**Authoritarian
governments are
increasingly sharing
“worst practices.”**

er to support the consolidation of democratic values and practice around the world. Since its inception, the CD has spawned several important working groups and initiatives, including efforts to engage with and defend civil society against increased governmental restrictions.

Yet, the CD has failed to become a preeminent, high-level platform for meaningful collective action by democracies to support and defend democracy. With the United States in the presidency, it is an opportune time to upgrade the CD and make it a venue for genuine policy coordination and action, as well as a counterweight to institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which are being used to advance nondemocratic agendas.

The present setbacks for democracy also offer an opportunity to radically rethink dominant approaches to democracy promotion and support for civil society. It is widely acknowledged that a strong, vibrant civil society is essential for innovation and progress and for holding governments accountable for delivering on democracy's promise. Civil society's role is so important that President Obama made supporting and defending civil society a priority for U.S. agencies engaged abroad.

But herein lies the dilemma. What if, despite our best intentions, support to civil society is actually contributing to closing space? Increasingly, research and experience point to a correlation between a heavy reliance on external sources of funding and weak links between civil society organizations and local populations—leaving these organizations vulnerable to accusations that they are serv-

ing a foreign agenda and alienated from the communities they are meant to serve.⁴ The dependence on short-term, donor-driven, project-based funding also draws organizations away from their core missions and the needs of their communities in pursuit of scarce resources. In a recent essay, Ford Foundation President Darren Walker labeled this system a “tyranny of donors—that distorts and inhibits, rather than unleashes, the potential of civil society.”⁵

The good news is that there are steps that donors can take to reverse this tide, beginning with making long-term, strategic investments in proven civil society organizations. Some aid organizations are already changing the way they do business, emphasizing the need for civil society to cultivate grassroots constituencies, encouraging partners to pursue local sources of funding, and diversifying their grantees beyond the usual, capital-based organizations.⁶

This approach is not without its risks. Donors will have to accept that progress cannot always be measured in discrete deliverables or with quantitative indicators, going against the current fixation with using scientific approaches and data to assess impact. Change will also require shifting the emphasis from the donor’s priorities to investing in the core mission of civil society partners. As an activist recently told me, “Don’t come here to ask me to execute your strategy, but to help me execute my strategy.” These ideas, while heretical to some and difficult to put into practice, will help restore accountability between civil society organizations and the communities they serve—putting civil society once again at the heart of safeguarding democracy.

Even if we do employ more effective strategies for empowering civil society and staunching the closing of civic space on a case-by-case basis, it remains to be seen whether the United States and its democratic allies are willing to contest the ground in this new war of ideas. There is a strong case for elevating the focus on democracy and human-rights promotion and leading with our values. Democratic countries are less prone to give rise to terrorists, proliferate weapons of mass destruction, or engage in aggressive behavior. The United States also has a moral responsibility to stand with those struggling for greater freedoms and human rights.

Perhaps most importantly, we cannot hope to defeat Russian propaganda or the Islamic State’s social media onslaught without a more powerful, values-based narrative of our own. Despite these factors, U.S. policy has been slow to recognize and respond to the growing threat posed by resurgent authoritarians. In part to distance itself from the Bush administration’s Freedom Agenda and its related misadventures in Iraq, the Obama administration has tended to take a pragmatic, transactional approach to authoritarian regimes and invest in multilateral initiatives, like the Open Government Partnership, that provide incentives for governments to improve transparency, accountability, and relations with civil society.

The next president will have a critical choice to make as he or she confronts an increasingly hostile world for democratic values and practices: will he or she embrace democracy and human rights promotion as a central aim of U.S. foreign policy or continue to let democracy’s standing wither? ■

⁴ Sarah E. Mendelson, “Why Governments Target Civil Society and What Can Be Done in Response,” A Report of the CSIS Human Rights Initiative, 2015, 1–11, http://csis.org/files/publication/150422_Mendelson_GovTargetCivilSociety_Web.pdf.

⁵ Darren Walker, “How Can We Help You?” State of Civil Society Report, Ford Foundation, 2015, 1–7, http://civicus.org/images/SOCS2015_ESSAY27_HowCanWeHelp.pdf.

⁶ Thomas Carothers, “Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 59–73.